

## Americans may view government negatively, but in film they see positive depictions of individual civil servants.

*Even in the Internet age, film is still an incredibly important source of entertainment, and a significant informer of opinions. But do films enhance or detract from American's already negative views of government? Looking at the top grossing films from 2002 to 2009, **Michelle Pautz** and **Megan Warnement** find that films generally have a mixed view of government with more negative depictions than positive. However, films portray individual government characters, such as, police officers, soldiers, and politicians, in a much more positive light.*



Widespread disdain for government seems readily explainable given the sluggish economy and increasing partisanship in Washington, D.C. As Charles Goodsell [reminds](#) us, "... Americans are taught throughout [their] lives, from hearth and home on through school and career, that government is a sea of waste, a swamp of incompetence, a mountain of unchecked power, an endless plain of mediocrity". The follow-up question invariably becomes: what are the sources of these negative opinions?



Narrative forms, especially film, can significantly [impact perceptions](#) and stereotypes about government. Since the birth of the cinema in the 1890s, through the nickelodeon era, to the emergence of cinemascope, and the now ubiquitous multiplex seemingly on every corner, film reaches [more Americans](#) than other forms of narrative entertainment (e.g. theatrical productions, novels, etc.). [According](#) to the Motion Picture Association of America, 1.34 billion movie tickets were purchased in 2010 in the U.S. and Canada and this does not account for the number of movies watched at home or in other venues, such as pay-per-view or television.

To examine portrayals of government in film, we selected the top ten box office grossing motion pictures in the United States from 2000 to 2009, as these are the ones most likely to have been seen by the majority of cinema-going Americans. Of the 76 films, 91 per cent had at least one government character and more than 400 government characters were identified.

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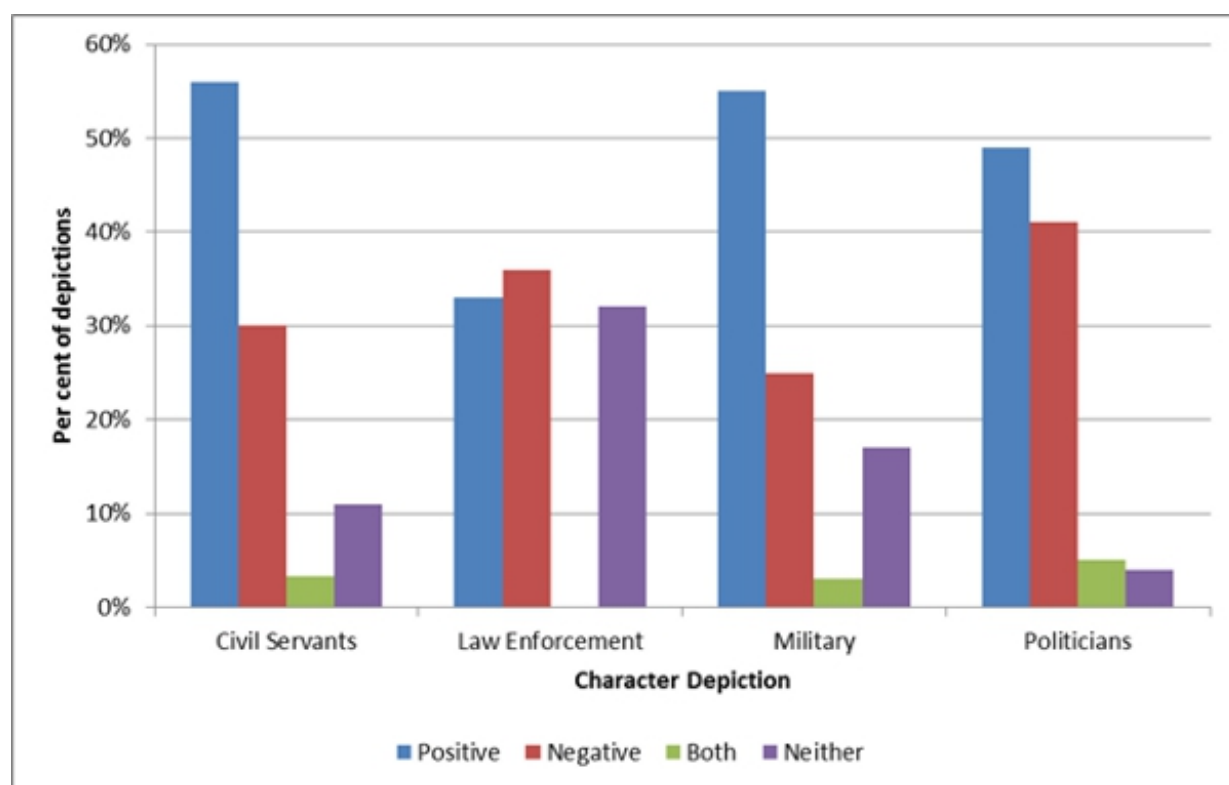
Generally, these films present a mixed view of government broadly; government characterized as good and inefficient, bad and competent. In 21 per cent of the films, government was coded as inefficient while in 19 per cent of the films, government was coded as good. Further, 17 per cent of films portrayed government as competent while 17 per cent showed government as incompetent. Finally, 14 per cent of films depicted government as bad and 12 per cent depicted government as efficient. At first, such varied responses were surprising – how could a film depict government as both inefficient and good? Take for example *Pirates of the Caribbean 2: Dead Man's Chest* where the general depiction of government was both good and incompetent. The royal governor and his government are set on upholding the laws, but the government struggles to thwart Captain Jack Sparrow and his pirate brethren in the film. Although piracy is against the law, the film creates sympathy for the pirates and makes the audience supportive of the pirates' escape while applauding the inability of the government to keep the pirates detained. From a narrative perspective, a mixed depiction might prove a necessity for good storytelling and from a societal viewpoint, a mixed depiction of government demonstrates the complexities of government and how Americans think about it. On the whole, 22 per cent of the films had a positive view of government, 29 per cent had a negative view, and 16 per cent had a mixed view (30 per cent of films did not have a government assessment).

Additionally, the depictions of the military and law enforcement were equally mixed. In 19 per cent of films, military and law enforcement were depicted as efficient and the same percentage found the

aforementioned group as good. Seventeen per cent of the films depicted the military and law enforcement as competent, yet 16 per cent of the films showed them as inefficient. Only 11 per cent of the films depicted military and law enforcement as bad. *The Dark Knight* helps explain the seeming contradictions in the depictions of military and law enforcement. Gotham City, in this film, is struggling to contain the crime wave brought on by Joker – thus the government appears to be both inefficient and incompetent. The villain is only stymied with the help of the hero – Batman. Yet, government, through noble characters like District Attorney Harvey Dent and Police Commissioner Gordon, is trying valiantly to stop Joker and his band of criminals. More generally, 28 per cent of films depicted law enforcement and the military positively, 29 per cent negatively and 9 per cent were mixed. These mixed depictions were somewhat surprising, yet they point to the complexities of government and its work, demonstrating that assessments of government are neither simplistic nor easy; perhaps looking at the portrayal of individual government officials might offer some further insights.

In terms of the 431 government characters, there was an array of types of characters, with the most common being teachers, followed by leaders of fantasy worlds and members of the Central Intelligence Agency. Fifty-six per cent of civil servants are depicted positively with only 30 per cent depicted negatively. This contradicts past research that suggests that Hollywood reinforces public's already poor opinion of government. The difference with our study is that the focus is on the individual civil servants, and at this level, they seem to be portrayed in a positive light. For example, consider Abigail Chase in *National Treasure: Book of Secrets* who works for the Smithsonian and is portrayed as intelligent, dedicated, and even a capable treasure hunter.

**Figure One: Depictions of bureaucrats, police officers, and soldiers in top grossing films from 2000-2009**



As shown in Figure One, above, not surprisingly 54 per cent of the military officials are depicted positively with only 25 per cent negatively depicted. Interestingly, 49 per cent of politicians are depicted positively while 41 per cent are depicted negatively. Queen Amidala, also known as Padme in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* is a politician that is shown in a positive light. However, to do this, the Queen is depicted as two people – a servant girl in disguise and also Queen Amidala. It is the servant girl, Padma that provides the positive depiction through her compassion and kindness towards young Skywalker – not Queen Amidala.

Finally, the portrayal of law enforcement provides an interesting representation because it is mixed. Thirty-six per cent of law enforcement characters are depicted negatively while 33 per cent are depicted positively. This mixed depiction is consistent with past research on law enforcement in American film since Americans have a complex relationship with law enforcement – police officers are needed and valued, but not when they are finding fault with our own actions. *Mission Impossible II* provides a scenario in which law enforcement agents for the same secret agency end up fighting each other. The entire movie consists of law enforcement figures and some of them try to end the world by unleashing a plague and it is up to the other law enforcement characters to save the day.

Even though there is a mixed depiction of government generally, it is interesting to uncover a more positive view of government officials as individual characters. Law enforcement characters are the most common (31 per cent) with civil servants a close second with 28 per cent. With the exception of law enforcement characters, all other categories of government officials have a generally positive depiction. These findings are a bit striking since the overall portrayal of government is mixed and public opinion data in the U.S. on government is generally negative.

It is interesting to note the differences in the general depiction of government in contemporary films while the portrayals of individual government characters are more positive. Indeed, these findings might contribute to the ongoing discussions of how Americans detest government, but seemingly re-elect the same leaders.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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